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FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8987

INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN IMMEDIATE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002688

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/31/2018

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM I2

SUBJECT: NINEWA: ASSYRIAN CHRISTIAN LEADERS DISCUSS  
POLITICAL AND SECURITY CONCERNS, AND THEIR DISDAIN FOR ISLAM

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Classified By: Nineva PRT Leader Alex Laskaris, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

This is a Nineva Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) message.

¶11. (C) Summary: The Assyrian Catholic communities of Kermalais and Bartala in northeast Nineva are focused on their future political status and the security of their communities. Their stated demand for some form of autonomy under the Article 140 process reflects a desire for control of local governance to the exclusion of non-Christian communities as well as a desire for continued association with the KRG. The two Christian communities are seeking the integration of currently functioning KRG-financed local security guards into the Iraqi police, but still under their own local operational control. Leaders in both communities expressed contempt for the Islamic faith, to which PRT Leader responded critically and forcefully. End Summary.

¶12. (C) PRT Nineva visited the Assyrian Catholic villages of Kermalais and Bartala on August 8. The visit was prompted by a UK press story alleging that the US Army in Mosul (sic) had approved the formation of a Christian militia in Bartala and was equipping it with radios. The 3rd ACR Provost Marshal had earlier clarified that the guards had in fact been hired locally and had been paid for by KRG Minister of Finance Sarkis.

SECURITY: ASSYRIAN CHRISTIANS WANT COMMUNITY CONTROL OF POLICE

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¶13. (C) We spoke with three priests, two mukhtars (village leaders) and a host of other local community members. Currently, there are 250 local Christian security guards in Kermalais, 650 in Qaraqosh, and 1,200 in Bartala. The security guards, who are paid on a part-time basis, receive about USD 200 per month. All of our interlocutors insisted that the Iraqi Police (IP) needs to recruit and train local Christians currently funded by the KRG and then needs to station them in their respective Christian communities. All made clear their desire that these new Iraqi Police personnel would remain subject to local political control.

¶14. (C) PRT leader said that we fully support the integration of minority members into the IP and are pressing the Minister of Interior to act on application packets currently on his desk. We said that police officers, unlike army soldiers, could be deployed primarily in their areas of origin, but also added that police officers need to serve the community as a whole, not one party or political tendency. Fr. Aymon Dana Paulus, parish priest at St. George's Assyrian Catholic Church in Bartala, said that the USG and Iraqi Army (IA) share some of the blame for the current situation because they did not focus enough on security in Bartala and

surrounding villages. According to Fr. Aymon, the deteriorating security situation was largely due to the presence of the Islamic extremists within Bartala's growing Shebak community.

IDPs: ASSYRIAN CHRISTIAN CONCERNS ABOUT INFLUX OF SHEBAK

¶ 15. (C) Fr. Aymon commented at length on Bartala's changing demographics. He said that in 1977 only two Muslim families lived in Bartala; now there are more than 400, mostly Shebak refugees who moved there after 2003. Fr. Aymon predicted that in 20 years Bartala would become a town with a Muslim majority. Kermalais' Fr. Younis echoed these thoughts, also noting the growing number of Shebak IDPs in the Assyrian Christian villages of Ninewa. Asked why they saw the Shebak as such a threat, both Frs. Aymon and Younis said they feared that, as minorities, Christians would receive little protection given the &Islamic nature& of the current Iraqi government. It was crucial, therefore, for Christians to maintain majorities in the communities they currently control.

¶ 16. (C) PRT told both Frs. Aymon and Younis that the Shebak were also a minority in Ninewa that faces serious threats. Told that Kermalais was actively opposing construction of a mosque for the Shebak, PRT leader said that the USG supports the rights of all to worship according to their traditions. Thereupon our interlocutors launched into a string of opprobrium directed at the Islamic faith (e.g., It is a fake religion, a religion of women, a religion that is out to dominate the world. It is a religion of uneducated people who do nothing but make babies all day."). PRT leader said that the USG did not agree with their views of Islam and that our commitment to minority rights applied equally to all

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confessions.

ECONOMICS: COMPLAINTS ABOUT UNDER-SERVED COMMUNITIES

¶ 17. (C) Frs. Aymon and Younis also discussed the dire economic situation facing their communities, citing inflation, unemployment and a lack of basic services. Fr. Aymon and Fr. Younis both said that Zuheir Chalabi has not offered to provide any assistance to either community. PRT and regimental personnel returned to Kermalais on August 15, at the joint request of the PRT leader and the commander of 3rd ACR's 1/8 battalion, whose AOR includes the village. They discussed the needs of the community, and PRT will approach the GOI and USAID for appropriate assistance.

¶ 18. (C) Comment: On security, which is a serious issue for both Assyrian Christian communities, the KRG has enabled the communities to take action where the GOI has failed. We need to continue to press the MOI to integrate minority recruits into the IP, but also ensure that they serve all members of a Hamdaniya Christian community that is genuinely divided over key existential issues. The views we heard of the Islamic faith were contrary to US policy and we said so. The lack of Assyrian Christian concern for the welfare of Shebak IDPs living in their areas was troubling. We met with Shebak leaders in Bartala on August 14 (septel) and will need to coordinate our assistance efforts in the area to ensure that our concern for the welfare of Christian communities does not detract from our work on a Shebak community that is poorer, more marginalized, and exposed to even greater anger. End Comment.

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